



90: The long, drawn-out dread is over by cali-chan

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Summary: Mike took a second to think of how weird everyone was acting, and then looked down, gaze landing straight away on the main headline of what was indeed that day's edition of The New York Times: GORBACHEV, LAST SOVIET LEADER, RESIGNS. "I have to go to El's," he declared, almost in a gasp. PG, romance/angst/family, post-S2, Mike/Eleven.

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[December 25th, 1991]

Christmas was the one day of the year that Mike Wheeler was allowed to sleep in when under his parents' roof.

Sure, that became less of a rule when he moved out of his childhood home for college, but now that he was back in Hawkins for the holidays, the routine went right back into place. So when he opened his eyes on Christmas morning to see the bright red numbers on the digital clock on his bedside table blaring at him that it was 11:30 am, he wasn't really bothered.

What *did* bother him, however, was the fact that he had to wake up alone.

He turned over onto his back with a groan. He would never understand why he and El had to keep up the pretense that they didn't share a bed on the regular— or why that farce extended to sleeping in separate *houses* while in Hawkins— simply for their parents' sake. Okay, no, he did know why: His mother would probably have an aneurysm if more than one of her children ended up "living in sin" with their significant other, and Nancy had already beaten him to the punch there.

Plus, yeah, it was Eleven's idea for them to live separately in Boston

because she wanted the "full college experience," which apparently included dorm life, but it's not like they didn't spend nearly every night in each other's rooms, anyway. He was pretty sure El's parents were aware of that and didn't mind. Well, Hopper might grumble about it, but he was under no delusions as far as the seriousness of his daughter's relationship was concerned.

Their first few days back in town had been a bit hectic, what with his birthday, then Christmas Eve, and now Christmas, so their respective families and friends had more or less commandeered their attention with reunion after dinner after celebration. Now that the lull between Christmas and New Year's was upon them, however, Mike didn't have any qualms about hanging out at El's and just... staying through the night. Jonathan was staying with Nancy, anyway, so it was a fair trade. And it's not like they were going to *do* anything... he just missed her. Waking up without El in his arms *sucked*.

Grumpy and still not entirely awake, he pushed himself out of bed and went about his morning routine without paying much attention to the hubbub of voices and general kitchen noise that floated up to the second floor from the rest of his family. It wasn't out of the ordinary; every Christmas, his mother would make them all a huge breakfast feast (more like brunch, really), which they would eat together before gathering in the living room to open presents, though these days the routine was more for Holly's sake than anything else.

Once dressed, he made his way downstairs, thinking of his plans for the day and only peripherally aware of his father ranting about something. Politics, probably. "...at least have a parade or something, I think. Someone should petition the mayor for one. This is something that needs to be celebrated!"

Turning the corner at the foot of the stairs, Mike just caught sight of his mother finishing plating breakfast. His father was standing at the entrance of the kitchen, his back to him, so when he saw his mother roll her eyes and shake her head, it was over his father's shoulder. "It's Christmas, Ted. I think there's enough celebration to go around already."

"Christmas happens every year, Karen," his father replied in a dismissive tone Mike knew all too well. "This is something that will

be written in history books. We should show the younger generations how important this moment is..."

Over his father's opposite shoulder Mike caught sight of Nancy, who was frowning, dividing her attention between the newspaper she held in front of her (probably The New York Times, since their mother had subscribed to it the day Nancy started her internship there), and Jonathan, who was further in the back, talking with someone on the phone. He seemed worried about something, too.

"What's going on?" Mike asked as he approached the kitchen. "Why do we need a parade?"

Everybody turned to look at him, and his father moved to the side so he could pass. "Only the greatest American victory of our lifetime, son," his father said, clapping him on the shoulder twice before walking further into the kitchen to pull a glass from the cupboards. Mike was immediately weirded out; his father was *never* that jovial with him. Whatever had him in a good mood, it had to be big.

"What's up with him?" he asked Nancy in a low tone, walking into the kitchen proper and noticing for the first time that Holly was sitting at the kitchen table, poring over an album of Jonathan's photos he'd brought with him from New York and blessedly ignoring their father's tirade.

Nancy fixed him with that same concerned look she kept throwing Jonathan, so dissonant considering their father's elation and their mother's placidity, and pursed her lips. "Here," she said, folding the newspaper in half and dropping it on the table, front page facing up.

Mike took a second to think of how weird everyone was acting, and then looked down, gaze landing straight away on the main headline of what was indeed that day's edition of The New York Times:

GORBACHEV, LAST SOVIET LEADER, RESIGNS; U.S. RECOGNIZES REPUBLICS' INDEPENDENCE

That bold headline was followed, immediately under a black-and-white photo of the Soviet leader in question, by the subheading:

The Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies

It took him a minute to process what he was reading. Sure, he'd been tangentially aware of what was going on elsewhere in the world; he knew the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse and that at some point it was going to dissolve. This was something that had been in the works for the last few years, and since the fall of the Berlin Wall it became less a matter of "will it?" and more a matter of "when?"

But he had never been an avid follower of the news like his father or sister, nor was El or any of their friends. He'd been so busy recently with school and the end of the semester that he was pretty much fully disconnected from any details regarding politics of any kind. The goings-on in Russia were simply not a topic that came up all that often (or at all) in conversation in the circles they ran in.

Now that he read the headline, however, it hit him all at once: The Soviet Union was no more. The Cold War was over.

His head snapped up so fast he thought he heard something crack, and his wide eyes zeroed in on Nancy's expectant expression. "I have to go to El's," he declared, almost in a gasp. Nancy gave him a tremulous, but encouraging, smile. She understood.

"Michael, we're just about to sit down for Christmas breakfast—" his mother started, but Mike wasn't listening anymore; he turned on his heel and sprinted to the front door, barely remembering to grab his keys and jacket before hurriedly making his way to his mother's car.

The drive to the Hoppers' was quick even when Mike *wasn't* in a hurry— everything in Hawkins was within a 10-minute drive. It was something he'd only really noticed the first time he came home on a break from school, and it still never failed to astound him. Today, though, he was barely paying attention as he drove; it was like he was running on automatic, and he probably made the drive in less than half his usual time.

He parked the car haphazardly beside Joyce's and ran to the house. He knocked on the front door but didn't wait for anyone to answer. He'd spent more time here with El than he had at his own house since they started dating, anyway, so it's not like anyone would think it

weird if he just came in; his presence in the house was almost expected by this point.

The entire family, sans Jonathan, was sitting in the living room in front of the television. El and Joyce were on the couch, holding hands so tightly that their knuckles were turning white; Will sat on the armrest, and Hopper stood behind the couch, arms crossed. They were all staring intently at the TV screen.

They all turned to look at him when they heard him come in, but only El had a visible reaction. "Mike," she exclaimed, and before he could say anything she was getting up and running straight into his arms.

She was trembling rather noticeably, and he hugged her tightly in an attempt to calm her, to reassure her that he, too, was going through all the emotions she was going through, that he understood what this day, what this event, meant to her because it meant the same to him. He heard her snuffle against his ear and he turned his head to press a kiss to her temple.

He didn't know how long they stood there clinging to each other, but it might've been a long time; he'd almost forgotten there were other people around them until Joyce came over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you two come into the living room? You're letting the cold air in," she pointed out as she closed the door behind him. He hadn't even realized it was still open. She smiled reassuringly. "Come on. Mike, have you had breakfast?"

He didn't answer, but Joyce went ahead and served him some leftover french toast anyway, bless her heart. He barely touched it, though, as they moved to the place El and Joyce had occupied on the couch. It wasn't until El moved to curl up against him that he realized he was still wearing his jacket; Will offered to hang it up in the foyer for him. Joyce moved to stand behind the couch with Hopper.

The broadcast wasn't particularly entertaining; for the most part it was just a bunch of news anchors talking over still shots of the Red Square— not even a live shot, really, because some of them were daytime clips and Mike knew it was already nighttime in Russia— but still they all watched, riveted.

The network switched to a live feed when the huge red flag started being lowered, and Mike's heart started beating so fast, you'd think they were watching an action film. He was sure he wasn't the only one, either; it felt like the entire room was collectively holding a breath. It was only when the flag was finally being unclasped from the flagpole that it felt like they could breathe again.

Will was the first to go; Mike looked up at him when he stood up, and Will gave him a small smile before walking away, probably headed to his room. About a minute or so later Joyce let out a quiet "I'll go do the dishes," and Mike heard her shuffle away toward the kitchen.

Hopper stood there for a bit longer, probably paying more attention to the news anchors' commentary than Mike had the wherewithal to. When the broadcast switched to commercials for the first time in over half an hour, Hopper finally decided he'd heard enough. The older man took a moment to clap Mike's shoulder tightly— the gesture infinitely more meaningful than when Mike's own father did it— and drop a kiss on the crown of El's head before leaving the room.

El's arms around him tightened, which could mean she was feeling content, or sad, or ecstatic, or scared, or all of the above. Mike didn't know what it was because he was feeling all of those things himself. A part of him felt like today's news should be a cause of celebration—not in the sense his father had meant it earlier, of course, but for much more personal reasons. As it was, what he felt the most was relief; he wasn't sure if he'd ever look back and think of this as a *joyful* moment, but it was a level of relief that was almost dizzying. Like a weight he'd been carrying around since 1983 had been lifted off his shoulders.

"Do you think it's over?" Eleven whispered against his shoulder, the first time she'd spoken since he arrived. Her voice was tremulous, and she paused to wipe a couple of tears from her cheeks. "Do you think we're safe?" He noticed the "we" straight away and loved her all the more for it.

It had taken a long time of them being together to shake her out of the mentality that she was in some way a burden on him, that her presence in his life somehow endangered him or complicated things

for him, that he'd be better off without her. What he needed her to understand was that "his life" did not exist anymore; this was *their* life, the life they were building together, and everything that affected her life and her safety also affected his, as well. They were in this together until the end. It took her years to fully internalize that.

Which was why her question was also a loaded question if he ever heard one. Were they safe? Could they ever be? They'd been through a moment like this before, when the government program that gave Eleven and her "siblings" their powers was dismantled, when all the major players involved with it were either neutralized or paying their dues for all the evil they committed. They'd been through a moment like this before, when they finally managed to push the Upside Down and its dark influence away from them, away from Hawkins, away from their world.

They'd been through moments like this before. Moments when they felt like they were finally free, like they could finally live their lives fully without fear, without doubt. They could just be themselves, do what they wanted to do, go through all the important milestones people their age went through without any more grief, any more loss, any more pain beyond their years.

This felt like that. Because despite all they had achieved before, the reason why the conspiracy started in the first place, the reason why Eleven's childhood had been destroyed in the first place, the reason why the government had started experimenting on innocent children in the first place— that reason had still been there. And as stable as things had been over the past few years, in the back of their minds they knew that while the war was still ongoing, they had no reassurance that they wouldn't come for her again if they needed a trump card, a weapon.

It was why Hopper had made sure Mike knew how to shoot before they moved out of Hawkins. It was why Mike kept a gun in a safe hidden in Eleven's dorm, just in case he ever needed to use it but hoping he never would. It was why Eleven refused to go to hospitals or airports even when avoiding them made things more difficult. It was why they mostly kept to themselves even while living in a big, bustling city.

They lived their lives like they were safe, like they were free. But they couldn't know. They could never know, really.

Today's news gave them a little more certainty.

Of course, they knew they'd always have to be careful not to inadvertently reveal the truth of Eleven's powers to anyone. That was always a risk, and they would have to keep their guards up for the rest of their lives to protect that secret. But the end of the Cold War meant there was no need for superhuman weapons anymore. At least until the next war broke out, they could go about their day to day without needing to look over their shoulders with every step they took. They could live their lives without jumping at every shadow. The fear was over. The dread was over.

"I don't know," he finally admitted in response to her question. "But it's better." He tightened his hold on her, drawing her close to his side, and leaned his forehead against her temple, his nose brushing against the apple of her cheek. "It's going to be better."

He saw her smile, and he knew this time it was really out of happiness. She believed him when she said that, and she felt it, too. He reached toward her to wipe away the tears that still clung to her skin, and she turned her head to look at him. "Mike?" Her beautiful honey-brown eyes locked on his. "I love you."

He nodded, smiling back. "I love you so much," he told her earnestly, his thumbs caressing her cheeks as he cradled her face in his hands. Then he tilted his head and leaned forward so he could kiss her wet, salty lips, marking with the gesture what truly felt like a new beginning.

Yeah, they'd be all right.

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Notes: So. In case you didn't know, I am a nerd. Not just a science nerd, either; I also happen to really really love history. That is

literally the only explanation I have for whatever the hell this is and where the hell it came from. Maybe it just feels topical these days. LOL. xD

On December 25th, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, eighth and last leader of the Soviet Union, resigned his post, in what became the effective end of the Cold War. That night in Moscow, around 7:30 pm (12:30 pm in Hawkins, Indiana), the Soviet flag atop the Kremlin was lowered, to be replaced a few hours later with the flag of the Russian Federation. The next day the Supreme Soviet (the legislative body of the USSR) would officially dissolve the Union for good. The Berlin Wall separated NATO-controlled West Berlin from the rest of communist-controlled East Germany. It first started to come down on November 9th, 1989, and that was one of the biggest signs of the USSR losing its control on the Eastern bloc.

The New York Times headline mentioned here is, indeed, the headline on the national print edition of that paper on December 25th, 1991. You can see it [here](#), or if you're on FFN (which won't allow me to link to it because they're ridiculous about URLs), you can also find the link on my Tumblr [girls-are-weird](#). The title for this story comes from a line from US President George H.W. Bush's 1992 State of the Union Address, referring to the end of the Cold War.

Also a quick heads up: in today's entry of my vlog at [FreakingNarnia dot com](#), I'm talking about the latest tidbits and news that have hit the internet about *Stranger Things* 3. Figured some of you might be interested in checking it out. If not, feel free to ignore this, haha.